

# OBESITY

## THE NEW WORLD EPIDEMIC

*Controlling obesity and weight gain is not simply a matter of eating less and exercising more, but eating the right kinds of nutritious foods that are not compromised by modern agricultural methods and factory production processes.*

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### The Dramatic Rise in Obesity and Related Diseases

The American documentary film *Super Size Me* follows the experiment of one young man who wished to find out what would happen if he ate fast food every day for one whole month.<sup>1</sup> We watch as Morgan Spurlock records his experience of eating McDonald's food three times per day for 30 days. As the story unfolds, we learn more and more about the growing obesity problem in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, we are treated to a thorough investigation of the resulting physical, mental and emotional effects of eating too much fast food. As we probably could have guessed, Spurlock gets sick and puts on weight very quickly. What is surprising is that he gets fatter and sicker than even his team of physicians could have anticipated. This experiment in diet raises the important question: is it really fast-food consumption that is causing the current dramatic rise in obesity? And what is it exactly about the fast food that makes it so unhealthy for us? Are there other factors involved? These are pertinent questions for all of us because obesity isn't just an American problem any longer. It is spreading out around the world at an increasing rate. The current estimate is that there are one billion overweight adults in the world, and 300 million of these individuals are clinically obese.<sup>3</sup>

In the United States alone, the number of obese people has doubled over the past 20 to 25 years. The current estimate is that 30% of the entire US population is clinically obese and 65% of the entire US population is overweight.<sup>4</sup> Since one of the biggest exports from the Western world is American culture, it is no wonder that our habits—and our health problems—are quickly dispersing around the globe. In other countries such as Russia, Germany and the Czech Republic, the adult obesity rates are between 23% and 26%.<sup>4a,4b</sup> In Australia, roughly 20% of the entire adult population is obese.<sup>5</sup> In the UK and Canada, the rate is closer to 15% of adults.<sup>6</sup> And the numbers keep growing because there has also been a tremendous increase in the numbers of overweight and obese children. It is estimated that 22 million children in the United States alone under the age of five years old are clinically obese. This number is twice as much as the number in 1980. The rate for adolescents is even more alarming because it has tripled since 1980, going from 5% of all teenagers up to 16% right now.<sup>7</sup>

The World Health Organization is well aware of what it is now calling the "globesity" epidemic.<sup>8</sup> It tells us that the many serious chronic diseases associated with obesity are costing the world billions of dollars in health-care costs and lost work hours. Obesity is second only to smoking as a leading cause of preventable disease. Obesity is a major risk factor in arteriosclerosis, diabetes and cancer—the diseases of modern industrialised society. The risk of heart attack, stroke and depression—not to mention the numerous non-fatal conditions including joint degeneration and gastritis—is far greater in the obese.

In the movie, we find that Spurlock clearly believes that the fast-food industry is the major contributor to this problem. He reiterates the current dogma about obesity, but we already know this story. First, he says we are eating way too much food, too many calories. Second, he says we are eating too much fat. Third, he states we are not exercising enough. We have heard these explanations over and over again. Are we just not getting it? Not trying hard enough? Or is the problem somewhere different?

Here is a list of the beliefs we collectively hold concerning obesity:

1. Obesity is the result of over-eating, of eating too many calories.

2. Obesity is the result of eating too much saturated fat. Eating fat—especially the fat from animal foods—makes you fat.
3. Obesity is the result of a lack of will power and a character weakness.
4. Obesity is a genetic trait, like brown eyes, and there's nothing you can do about it.
5. Obesity is caused by overindulgence, throwing caution to the wind, gluttony and lack of moral fibre.
6. Obesity is caused solely by lack of physical movement.

We have all suspected at one time or another that fast food and candy were not good for us. The percentage of Americans who frequent fast-food establishments on a regular basis is probably around 20%, yet the percentage of Americans who are overweight is closer to 65%. Clearly, the fast-food connection cannot be blamed for everything.

We have so much faith in our "meat and potatoes" diet, but we fail to acknowledge that even these foods are different than they once were. The meat has been harvested from sick animals and it is laced with hormones, antibiotics and other drugs. The quality of the fats and proteins in the meat has been radically altered due to the aberrant diet these animals have been raised on. The potatoes have been genetically modified and treated with harsh and persistent pesticides, synthetic fertilisers and other additives.

It used to be that the food one bought at the supermarket to bring home and cook was of far superior quality than the stuff you bought from fast-food restaurants. However, we can no longer make that assumption. We are comfortable blaming all of our health woes on junk food for many reasons. Perhaps we are in denial about the true state of our food supply.

In any case, the agriculture industry likes us to pin the blame on fast food because it takes the eyes of the public away from them. The sad fact is that the food you buy at McDonald's and the food you get from the supermarket is not as different as it once was.

On some level we feel like we have the situation currently under control. The government and health authorities have done their studies and made their recommendations. Things are going for them as planned. And yet the situation desperately calls for greater in-depth analysis and understanding. We need to look at obesity from a different perspective in order to change the way things are progressing. Our current approach is just not going to get the job done. At its roots, obesity is a symptom of a much bigger problem. Using a more holistic viewpoint like the one offered us by traditional systems of medicine could provide a deeper understanding of our predicament.

### The Bucket Theory

One popular explanation of obesity is based on the "bucket theory". This hypothesis says that the human body is like a bucket: the food you put in fills the bucket, and the exercise you do empties the bucket. So, people who gain weight are just overfilling and under-emptying their buckets. The take-home message that has been stuffed down our throats is that we are eating way too much and exercising way too little. But there is so much more to it than that!

This bucket theory assumes that all calories can be treated

equally, that all have the same impact on health and disease. It neglects to take into account the differences between food produced in a healthy way and food produced in an unhealthy way. It fails to notice the dissimilarity between the particular qualities associated with each food category. It fails to take into consideration the actual needs of the human body. And most of all, it ignores all of the other complicating factors that contribute to obesity besides too much food and lack of exercise.

The bucket theory starts with the assumption that all of the normal body processes are intact and functioning properly in someone who turns obese, but this seems not to be the case. We need to let go of the idea that obesity is the result of normal physiological mechanisms. In order for the body to make the kind of morbid accumulations associated with obesity, it has to be in a different operating mode than normal. It is almost as if the body is in survival mode, and creates the obese body type as a last-ditch attempt at retaining life under unusually harsh circumstances which are both internal and external. Certainly there is a variety of functional disturbances, hormonal and metabolic abnormalities and pathogenic influences involved. My suspicion is that you could not take a normal, healthy person and make them into an obese individual just by overeating and not exercising.<sup>9</sup>

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Other possible factors involved in obesity include multiple nutrient deficiencies, dysfunctional organ systems, imbalanced endocrine and hormonal activity, addiction, depression, exhaustion and feelings of psychological and spiritual emptiness. Simply telling an obese person that he or she needs to eat less and exercise more is just too simple-minded to be an effective strategy to combat this complex condition. And that is just where we are right now. It is necessary to take a full assessment of the situation and consider all of the aspects with

which we are confronted. People become obese for a variety of reasons or, rather, as a result of multiple factors.

It is also true that we do need to take a closer look at exactly what we are eating: which foods we are eating more of and which we are eating less of. Is eating fat really making us fat? Humans have been eating lots of fat for a long time. Some cultures get 70% of their calories from fat, and that has been true for generation after generation for thousands of years.<sup>10</sup> Why should we be having so much of a problem with it now? We have always been eating fat in our foods—that hasn't changed. The thing that *has* changed is the *type* of fat that we are eating. For example, butterfat consumption has decreased steadily over the years. Similarly, coconut oil consumption has decreased precipitously compared with just a few decades ago. Meanwhile, the consumption of all vegetable oils has skyrocketed<sup>11</sup>—no doubt due to the fact that these kinds of oils (especially hydrogenated and partially hydrogenated oils) are the main ingredient in many of the prepackaged foods that we buy at the supermarket. Another dubious ingredient which is often found alongside vegetable oil is high-fructose corn syrup. We are now consuming more of these two food ingredients than ever before.

My experiences in treating obese people in an "alternative" clinical practice suggest that the physiognomy of obesity is a far more complicated scenario than simply excess caloric intake and

insufficient exercise. Examination of actual people has shown me that there is not just an excess of tissues but there are also great deficiencies present. In Western science we would equate these kinds of deficiencies with missing vitamins, minerals and enzymes and exhaustion of the endocrine glands. In clinical practice, it is all too common to see patients present with an excessive accumulation of bodily debris and a concomitant deficiency of the proper materials on which good health is predicated. The process by which this transformation takes place has certain features that coincide with the American way of life and our Western ideologies. It is inherent in our food choices, in the way we take care of our bodies, in the way we deal with our emotions, work, childbearing and so on. We haven't had a truly health-conscious approach to life in many generations.

The problem is not simply accumulated fat. We must consider the fact that the processed and prepared foods we buy at the supermarket are not as easily digested as their natural counterparts. As a result, there is much that is absorbed from the intestines and into the bloodstream that cannot be assimilated through normal body functioning. Obesity is a combination of the accumulation of these indigestible materials, coupled with depleted body energies, depleted endocrine reserves and depleted digestive capacity. The end result is a loss of complexity in the system; the body turns into a garbage bag filled with things it neither needs nor is capable of breaking down or eliminating. Externally, we can see that things are clearly different. We don't even call it fat anymore because we know it is something else. Cellulite, "junk in the trunk", "mud flaps", "spare tyre", "beer belly": even in the common vernacular we know that it is something different than just regular fat deposits. The fat itself in an obese person actually has a different chemistry than fat found in a healthy person.

Every cell in the body of every person (whether obese or not) has some fat in it. The cellular membrane which composes the barrier that defines each cell is called the phospholipid bilayer, and it is made of fat—roughly 50% saturated and 50% unsaturated fat in a typical blood cell, for instance. That means there is a sheet of fat molecules that make up the surface of every cell. Like a balloon holds air, the cellular membrane contains the contents of a cell. Every cell in the body is made this way. Much activity happens at the cellular membrane. Hormones and other molecules bind to the membrane and cause the cell to engage in all essential life functions. Everything that the cell needs in order to operate and survive must pass through it. The cell membrane must act as a "selective barrier", meaning that it selectively allows certain molecules to go through while preventing the passage of unwanted materials. These membranes need a constant supply of new fat molecules to replace the ones that are lost through various processes. There must be a proper mix available of saturated and unsaturated fats of good quality in order to ensure the correct functioning of these intricate structures. If the proper fat molecules are not present in the

bloodstream, the body will insert whatever fat molecules are available.

In obese people, the cellular membranes contain a distorted mixture of fat molecules.<sup>12</sup> An immediate result is that the cells are no longer able to function properly. The membrane can no longer operate as a selective barrier and the cell lets in whatever is floating around in the bloodstream. As the fat cells grow larger, they allow even more of the improper lipids to accumulate. Healthy components such as the enzyme lipase, which breaks down fat molecules, are notably absent. Fat in itself can be used as a storage area for fat-soluble substances, and many of the environmental toxins to which we are exposed are fat-soluble: they are "oily" as opposed to "watery". As a result, the fat tissue accumulates this toxic debris and stores it indefinitely. The fat is capable of synthesising its own potentially toxic substances: oestrogen, for example, is

produced by fat tissues in both men and women. While a healthy balance of oestrogen is essential for good health, when there is too much in the body it can cause all kinds of difficulties. Oestrogen promotes the growth and build-up of tissues, so it helps to keep fat in the body. Also, it is a potential tumour growth factor.

#### **Corruption of the Food Supply**

We cannot blame fast food for all our woes. Foods made entirely of factory-fabricated concoctions are the norm in today's marketplace. Laboratory-generated ingredients such as partially hydrogenated and hydrogenated oils, which many studies have linked to a variety of chronic degenerative diseases such as diabetes, cancer and obesity, are in nearly all packaged foods.<sup>13</sup> Preservatives, fillers and sweeteners are added to our foods. It is difficult to find items in a supermarket that do not contain sugar or high-fructose corn syrup. Genetically modified organisms are commonplace, with an estimated 70% of all processed foods containing them.

Apparently the agriculture industry feels no remorse for its endless manipulations of our food supply, since it is planning more of the same in the future. As long as we remain unaware and unconcerned with these acts, we will be sold the kinds of products that result in the biggest profits for the industry. It seems that the well-being of the consumer is given little consideration beyond the marketing strategies that attempt to pass off this junk as healthy.

Many individuals who buy and consume food from the agriculture industry seem unaware of how the food is actually produced. It is no coincidence that much of this information is kept hidden from public scrutiny.

Mass-produced animals of the agriculture industry are housed inside cruelly cramped environments. They eat whatever is cheapest to feed them, including "recycled" animal carcasses. They are given drugs, hormones and antibiotics just so they won't die before they grow large enough to eat. All of these unnatural processes and stresses change the fabric of the meat in many

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important ways. It changes the balance of fatty acids to an unhealthy overabundance of omega-6 and an absence of omega-3. It adds many toxins and chemical burdens. Animals fed waste products, corn and soybeans are not healthy. Cows normally eat grass and hay, and when they are fed an abnormal diet this drastically changes the quality of the meat so that the fat content and proteins are no longer as health-promoting as they once were.

Interest in locally grown foods produced with the consumer in mind has been increasing steadily over the years, so you may not need to search very far to find them. Many cities have "farmers' markets" where local producers sell food directly to the public. Food co-operatives which support the health of the local economy are once again gaining popularity as an alternative to mainstream supermarkets. Additionally, there are many organic and biodynamic farms open to the public. Several websites are available to assist people in finding local retailers. The Weston A. Price Foundation has been helping people for decades by providing much information on healthy food and where to locate it (check it out at <http://www.westonaprice.org> or <http://www.realmilk.com>). Another interesting website that offers information on locating healthful food providers is <http://www.themeatrix.com>; be sure to watch the video clip. A wonderful cookbook that contains excellent information on diet and nutrition is *Nourishing Traditions* by Sally Fallon with Mary Enig, PhD. These references are provided here for the benefit of those wishing to pursue a more health-giving approach to diet.

The current trend in treating obesity at the level of the masses is to place full responsibility for the problem on those who are most affected by it. In some respects, this is a legitimate approach. If people stopped buying the kinds of foods that are sold in supermarkets, then the food industry would stop producing them and supermarkets would stop selling them.

Whether food producers have any obligation at all to consumers is beyond the scope of this article.

Additionally, whether media advertising has any effect on our buying habits, as many have suggested, and therefore on obesity trends is not covered here. Even though we are all exposed to the socialisation processes that lead us to a life of mass-market consumerism, each of us has the capacity to change any of these behaviours at any time. Perhaps the first step is to become cognisant of what has been going on.

### **Psycho-Spiritual Aspects of Obesity**

One of the biggest psychological components of obesity is addiction. People use food for many, many different reasons: as entertainment, comfort, a substitute for sex, or whatever. When such behaviours are taken to an extreme, they foster complacency and result in a failure to take risks and try something different. There is a spiritual emptiness that is associated with obesity where people try to fulfil themselves in

different ways with food. It seems that each of us must contend with a variety of internal stresses and conflicts that require introspection to achieve resolution. But as long as we are self-medicated and anaesthetised on a poor diet, it is going to be difficult to get in touch with these deeper underlying issues. The nature of addiction is to keep us in a state where we are constantly coping with pain caused by something deep and unaddressed in us. Until we start to give up on the addiction a little bit, we never get to see what is truly causing the emptiness and pain.

The addiction to food can become almost secondary to the habitual indulging in self-defeating thoughts and feelings. When we fill ourselves with bad feelings like low self-esteem, helplessness and hopelessness, these do not improve the outcome of the situation. For some individuals, living in a depressed state contributes to obesity via addiction to comforting foods. This observation is based on the idea that unhappy people eat more to make themselves feel better. Another possibility is that the depressed state in itself contributes directly to obesity by decreasing the efficiency of bodily functions. Wallowing in unpleasant emotions creates stagnation and blockage in the organ systems, impairing their ability to function.

In order to overcome addiction, we must live as whole people. All of the different aspects of life must be engaged and enjoyed. We must be present, at least to some extent, in all our own processes—physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. When we neglect any of these parts of ourselves, degeneration is inevitable. In our modern society, we tend to acknowledge only the physical aspects of our bodies. Anything concerning the mind or emotions is relegated to the brain and higher nervous system. Yet there is a connection within each organ between these different levels. Many traditional systems of medicine recognise the intelligence which is present in the tissues of each part of the body. Within each organ there are emotions and thinking patterns. These

energies are just as much an inseparable part of the organ as the physical substance. And the energetic portions can become just as diseased and dysfunctional. Our dietary decision-making has effects not only on the physical tissues, but on our mental and emotional health as well.

When we connect psycho-spiritual disorders such as depression with obesity, we sometimes make the assumption that the problem lies only with eating behaviours. However, oriental medical philosophy links the emotions directly to the proper functioning of the organ systems. According to this way of thinking, weight gain could actually be the direct result of feeling depressed, regardless of any changes in food consumption. Experiencing certain habitual emotions and thoughts can have the effect of decreasing the functional efficiency of the internal organs. It is not just the feelings that can get depressed, but all the different parts of the body as well. Disease is inevitable when the organs are non-functional due to the incapacitating effects of improper diet combined with the dampening effect of

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depressed emotions. When there are emotional traumas, repressed emotions or emotional excesses, these things have negative consequences for the internal organs as well. The physical tissues and the emotional and mental spheres of consciousness are much more tightly connected than previously imagined.

Much emphasis is placed on the need for physical activity. While it is true that humans need to move around and get some exercise in order to be healthy, physical activity isn't enough. There needs to be movement on the mental and emotional levels as well. Humans need to think and feel, too, in order to be whole, complete beings. Our modern-day lifestyles not only squelch our capacity to perform physical exercise, but also our thinking and feeling abilities. Our demanding schedules leave us little room to think for ourselves. It seems that, instead of giving ourselves the space we need to feel and release our emotions, we easily get trapped and mired in them with solutions aimed at coping with the dysfunction rather than ever really resolving it.

### Overcoming Obesity

As we have seen in this article, obesity is a condition caused by multiple factors. We have painted a picture that diverges considerably from the accepted myths and misconceptions. In summary:

1. Obesity is a condition involving malnourishment and major nutrient deficiencies.
2. Obesity arises from dysfunction in the normal operating patterns of the digestive system due to long-term poor diet.

3. Obesity is supported by an imbalanced endocrine system which is non-functioning due to ingestion of processed vegetable oils, sugar, exogenous hormones and environmental toxins.

4. Obesity has its roots in addiction, depression and stagnation of an individual's mental and emotional outlook.

5. Obesity is associated with the avoidance of the foods that would actually be beneficial, such as healthy animal fats and protein.

The commonly prescribed solution of "eating less and exercising more" typically fails because it does not address any of these key issues.

If we are going to overcome obesity as a public health disorder, each person must take back his or her power of choice and decide again on how to live. We each have the opportunity many times every day to choose a life of health

or a life of sickness.

Taking responsibility for this power and utilising it to its full extent is what we desperately require.

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### Endnotes

1. *Super Size Me* (2004), directed by Morgan Spurlock, distributed by Showtime Independent Films and others.
2. Obesity is defined as having a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 30 or over, and having a BMI of 25 or over is the strict definition of being overweight. To determine your BMI, measure your weight in kilograms and divide this number by the square of your height measured in metres; i.e.,  $BMI = \text{weight (kg)} / \text{height (m)}^2$ .
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7. CDC/NCHS, "Prevalence of Overweight and Obesity Among Children and Adolescents: United States, 1999–2002", <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/hestats/overwght99.htm>.
8. WHO, "Controlling the global obesity epidemic", <http://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/obesity/en/>.
9. There are two points to consider on this issue. First, Morgan Spurlock himself returned to a healthy bodyweight after discontinuing his McDonald's diet. Second, there is a remote tribe in Africa that has a kind of "fat contest" where participants attempt to gain more weight than anyone else over a short period of time. During the contest, each participant

lives within a small circle of about a five-foot radius and doesn't move from there until the end. Friends bring the individual large quantities of milk with which they gorge themselves. Predictably, the individuals grow to massive proportions. But after the contest, all individuals return to their normal daily routine and eventually shrink back to a healthy size.

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